

LOS ANGELES MUSEUM
EXPOSITION PARK



LOAN EXHIBITION
OF
JAPANESE LACQUER
INRO
JULY 23—SEPTEMBER 14, 1924

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

"The almost universal favor with which collectors regard old Japanese lacquer is a testimony to its singular beauty, its never ending individuality and the genius of the artist-craftsman superior to all others. . . . The Japanese outstripped all competitors; their superiority is incontestable."—J. F. BLACKNER, Page 134.

While lacquer work is one of the earliest of the Chinese industrial arts it remained for the Japanese to bring the borrowed art to a height of perfection never attained by the Chinese. All of the scholars and writers of the world are so completely in accord regarding the superlative value and immeasurable superiority of the work of the old Japanese lacquer masters that even the above quotation is superfluous. It is interesting, however, to note that in Blacker's list of supreme lacquer arts "Inro" (in,=seal; ro,=case) are given first place in containing all the concentration and essences of an art that reaches the world's highest point of sublimity, regarded by many as the cream of the cream of the whole earth's fine arts productions.

In this sensational assemblage of the real "creme de la creme" in this remarkable collection, we not only behold the choicest pieces fashioned in the whole period of fine arts sublimity in Japan but we actually have before us a collection garnered from the period of periods, when this all but superhuman art of beauty reached its culminating height of almost God-like perfection.

In the disquieting periods of sudden and thunderous upheavals that were constantly experienced in the days of "Yuritomo," "Hojo," "Ashikaga," "Nobunaga," "Foyotomi," and even well into the commencing period of the "Tokugawa," the peace of Spirit essential to the calm and patient formation of such super-exquisite labors were constantly lacking and constituted a strongly disturbing element to the progress and perfecting of the arts of those times.

It was only when the universal power and wisdom of the "Tokugawa" Shoguns were solidly established facts that the princes and high patrons of the arts could consider themselves in the securely guaranteed position that enabled them and their artist proteges to devote themselves in peace and patience that ultimately brought the refined arts to perhaps the highest period of attainment ever known in human history.

This wonderful collection of over 300 pieces are the products of the princes among artists of that sublime period including from the third to the thirteenth Shogun, or from the year 1630 to about 1850.

Perhaps the greatest test in history to which the labors of ancient master-artists were ever submitted occurred in the year 1874. In that year the ship "NILE," taking a quantity of fine art objects sent by the Japanese government to the Vienna Exhibition, sank near Yokohama. After a year at the bottom of the sea the ancient lacquer was recovered in perfect condition. The test was indeed a terrible one but the wonderful lacquer nobly met it, so that the pieces in this collection are as sound today as the day they were made, or perhaps even better.

These little pets of princes have ever hitherto been preserved with loving care and reverential respect, within the sanctum sanctorum

of an ancient patrician house. Had it not been for the ravages and devastation of the great earthquake and fire (and the constant fear of possibility of their being lost to the world forever), we, here, would never have had the chance to behold or acquire this royal and really priceless treasure of arts.

Each Inro is corded and carries with it its netuske. These little wonder works, the netuske or knobs, if detached would form in themselves a very valuable collection.

Every piece is so authentic as to artist and period that it is possible to supply the mark of authenticity from the highest institution in the world qualified to deal with this branch of fine arts, *i. e.*, the Imperial Academy of Arts, Tokyo.

The most of the masterpieces of Kajikawa, called the "prince of lacquer artists," are to be found in this collection. The grand line of masters' names whose works are rarely seen, even in single pieces, are here seen in generous display of their dominant genius. There are Toshusi, Eieishikogi, Kyoru, Hoichi, Komantoku, Uzan, Yosai, Moyo, Kokakusai, Jokasai, Yoshioki, Lomada, Masamitsu, Hosensai, Kiyuhaku, Shokasai, Yasukuni, Metsushin, Yotokusai, Inokawa, Harimasa, Kansoshai, Yoyusai, Lugemi, and the whole galaxy of the most brilliant stars of genius expressed in a spectacular array of over 300 bewildering treasures of beauty in every color, combination and conceivable inspirational idea.

There are lacquers in the decorated "gold grounds," "fine mirror black," "fine gold powder," "coarse powder," "pure gold," "incrustations in mother of pearl, in ivory, in metals," "inlaying," forming mosaics and in "aventurine" and in almost every conceivable design and subject, forming such a grandiose vision of wonder as to take the breath and make attempts at description impossible, and justifies "Blacker's" fervent hope that they "must be gathered into the museum before the hand of the millionaire closes over them."

A little information on the astonishingly infinite operations essential to create a supreme work of art, such as one of these Inro, would perhaps be appreciated here. There are about twenty-two preparatory processes to be gone through before the "Inro" is considered ready for its royal robes in the form of the decoration of the lacquered surface. Beginning with the twenty-third process the artist takes up the transferring of the design to the object, from thin paper, to which a coating of glue and alum had been applied. The reverse is rubbed smooth with a polished shell, or pebble, and the lines are gently traced—in "charcoal roasted" lacquer—using for the purpose a fine brush made of rat's hair. The paper is next placed with the lacquer side under on the object and is carefully and gently rubbed with a whalebone spatula over the tracings. It is next lightly rubbed with a piece of cotton wool and powdered white whetstone which sticks to the lacquer. Next the principal veinings of the pattern are carefully traced out and then powdered with gold dust through a quill. The object is then placed to dry for twenty-four hours in the drying press, or oven, after which the outline is carefully drawn with a rat's hair brush—over the original line—with a mixture of Ro-se; *i. e.*, branch and black lacquer. The next operation is to fill in with Ro-se, applied with a ground brush of rabbit's hair. Another thin coating is given to the section where gold powder is used and the object is placed to dry for twelve hours. A coat of Ro is next put over the whole surface and the article is set to dry for at least three days. The next process is

grinding with magnolia charcoal while the surface dust is continually wiped with a damp cloth until the design underneath faintly appears. Another coat of Ro is given and the object is placed to dry for thirty-six hours. It is then again ground with magnolia charcoal till the design appears plainly.

In the case of raised gold lacquer the object is given a thick coating which is sprinkled with charcoal dust and set to dry for twelve hours. When taken out of the press it is washed with a brush of human hair to clean out all the crevices and bring out all lines, etc. Some branch lacquer with camphor is then rubbed on with a piece of cotton wool and carefully wiped off with satin tissue paper and the Inro put to dry for twelve hours. The raised parts are then ground smooth with magnolia charcoal and another coat of branch lacquer is applied, as before, and the article is then thoroughly dried.

In high raised work two or three coats of "Sabi" and "Tonoko" are applied and the outside edges painted with a brush of deer's hair called "Menso." The work is set to dry for twelve hours between each application. It is next ground with a yellow whetstone and then branch lacquer mixed with camphor is rubbed on with cotton wool and wiped off with the soft satin-like paper. Next a coating of "Taka-maki" lacquer is applied, the exterior edges being drawn carefully with a rat's hair brush and the object is then put to dry for thirty-six to forty-eight hours. When taken out of the drying press the surface is ground smooth with magnolia charcoal and then partly polished with powdered camelia charcoal on a cotton cloth. A little oil is next rubbed on and a further polishing is given with powdered whetstone applied with a cloth. Next, "branch" lacquer is rubbed over the raised parts with cotton wool and then wiped off with the soft tissue paper, and the object is placed out to dry for twelve hours. After this, the next operation is that of polishing with deer's horn ashes and rape seed, or a fine oil applied with the finger end.

There are innumerable modifications and combinations of the above processes in the making of the ancient lacquer of the "Inro" type. These few processes mentioned here are merely to give an idea of the excruciating pains and almost unbelievable time and patience employed before we can behold such a "joy of beauty" as is produced by the labor of the artist.

These little art "wonder things" defy all the actions of time and, unlike human life, they attain a greater and softer beauty with the passing years, just as a bronze obtains a natural patina. As they grow in years they increase in loveliness, rarity and, naturally, their value is augmented by every day that passes.

There is no other object in the whole realm of the fine arts into which so much patience, thoroughness and human sentiment has been imbued. This is forcibly revealed by the fact that "Inro" were considered as the highest expression of miniature art beauty and were bestowed, as kings bestow royal orders—on distinguished personages, or other princes, as a mark of outstanding merit and highest favor.

No greater compliment than this could ever be paid and it sets the seal forever of olympic supremacy on these immaculate miniatures of the "arts of ages."

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